

## Behind the Term: Serious Mental Illness

*Related terms: chronic mental illness, severe and persistent mental illness, serious and persistent mental illness, serious emotional disturbance, emotional and behavioral disorder, severe mental illness, schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorders, manic-depressive disorder, major depression, depression, bipolar disorders, psychotic disorders, delusional disorders, major depressive disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder, bulimia nervosa, anorexia nervosa, depression in childhood and adolescence, schizophrenia in childhood or adolescence, substance use in childhood or adolescence, eating disorders in childhood or adolescence, pervasive developmental disorders, affective disorders, mood disorders, anxiety disorders, disruptive behavior disorders, conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.*

**T**he terms *chronic mental illness, serious mental illness, serious and persistent mental illness, severe and persistent mental illness, and severe mental illness* are often used interchangeably; however the most current terms used to reflect this type of impairment is *serious mental illness (SMI)* and *severe and persistent mental illness (SPMI)*. The terms ‘serious and persistent mental illness’ and ‘seriously and persistently mentally ill’ evolved from the term “chronically mentally ill”; but with recognition that not all forms of SMI are chronic and since persons with SMI can be responsive to treatment, the terms chronic and persistent dropped out of the federal definition.

On occasion, however, *serious mental illness (SMI)* and *severe and persistent mental illness (SPMI)* are used to refer to distinct conditions; this is because, although all forms of serious mental illness (SMI) are disabling in some way, they are not always severe and persistent (that is, chronic and difficult to treat). On balance, mental health professionals tend to use the term ‘severe and persistent mental illness’, whereas federal agency staff tend to use the term SMI.

It is also important to note that definitions of the term ‘SMI’ vary depending whether it is used for legal purposes (to establish eligibility for disability or supplemental social security benefits) or for epidemiological purposes (to track its prevalence and incidence over time). While legal definitions may vary, epidemiological definitions must be based on standardized measures and be stable over time. However, for clinical assessment and treatment purposes, a more multidisciplinary, biosocial approach for defining SMI is needed.

The federal definition of the term SMI originally came from the 1992 Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration (ADAMHA) Reorganization Act (Public Law No. 102-321). This definition was created to help federal entities like the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimate the incidence and prevalence of SMI in states that were applying for grant funds to support mental health services (Insel, 2013). Previous federal use of the term *chronic mental illness* dissolved, when clients and advocates argued that the term had negative connotations, suggesting that some forms of mental illness are intractable (Goldman & Grob, 2006). As a result, the term *chronic mental illness* was changed to *severe and persistent mental illness*, and then later to *serious mental illness*.

As defined by federal regulation, SMI is a condition that affects “persons aged 18 or older who currently or at any time in the past year have had a diagnosable mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder (excluding developmental and substance use disorders) of sufficient duration to meet diagnostic criteria specified within DSM-IV (APA, 1994) that has resulted in serious functional impairment, which substantially interferes with or limits one or more major life activities” (e.g., maintaining interpersonal relationships, activities of daily living, self-care, employment, recreation). (SAMHSA, 2013, section 2, 11).

The federal definition of SMI refers to adults with particular diagnoses plus functional impairment, excluding substance-related disorders, developmental disorders, dementias, and mental disorders due to a general medical condition (SAMHSA, 2006); whereas the legal definition is much more flexible. The legal definition includes a wide array of childhood and adult disorders and does not require that there be any functional impairment. These include “major mental illnesses, typically defined in statute as schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, psychotic disorders, bipolar disorder, major depression, panic disorders, and obsessive compulsive disorder.” (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2009).

Thus, whereas federal regulations consider particular mental disorders as meeting criteria for SMI, legal definitions consider a larger array of mental, behavioral, or emotional disorders, as long as they result in functional impairment which substantially interferes with or limits one or more major life activities. The reasons for these variations are unclear, but worth noting.

In addition, rather than using the term SMI to refer to mental disorders causing significant impairment in children, federal regulations offer an analogous definition of SMI called *serious emotional disturbance (SED)* for children (Goldman & Grob, 2006). For a definition of SED, click [here](#) (forthcoming).

Many mental health advocates and administrators point out that, although SMI is most commonly associated with a particular set of disorders such as schizophrenia, schizoaffective

disorder, bipolar disorder, or major depressive disorder; all mental illnesses have the potential to produce impairment or qualify as “serious” according to the federal usage of the term.

The following is a summary of SMI-related terms that can be used interchangeably:

- affective disorders ≈ mood disorders
- bipolar disorders ≈ manic–depressive disorder/manic depression
- major depressive disorders ≈ major depression
- serious mental illness ≈ severe mental illness
- serious emotional disturbance ≈ emotional and behavioral disorder

SMI-related terms that are nested within other terms include the following:

- affective disorders: depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder
- anxiety disorders: panic disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder
- disruptive behavior disorders: conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
- eating disorders: bulimia nervosa, anorexia nervosa
- psychotic disorders: schizophrenia, delusional disorder, schizoaffective disorder, bipolar disorder with psychotic symptoms

## References

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